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SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE REFUGEE TRAIN

During the 150th Civil War anniversary of the Shenandoah Valley Burning, little attention has been given to the wagon train that left Harrisonburg in early October, 1864.

Military history books, biographies of General Philip Sheridan, and general accounts of the era barely mention the sixteen mile wagon train that Union forces escorted north along the Valley Pike at the end of the 1864 Valley Campaign. There were eyewitnesses, however, and the story of the wagon train and its Brethren and Mennonite refugees can now be told with greater detail. Biographies of General Philip Sheridan from some decades ago are silent on the wagon train exodus, though more recent biographies and military accounts are including primary source information that include this lesser known story from “The Burning.”

In this issue of *Historian*, Rebecca Suter Lindsay, great-granddaughter of Emanuel Suter, granddaughter of David I. Suter, and daughter of Beverly Suter, writes about the Suter family experience in the 1864 refugee train. We also include one of Rebecca’s

poems entitled “Shenandoah Refugees: October 1864.” Lindsay’s poem helps the contemporary reader feel the difficulties, the tensions, and the ordeal experienced by Valley families who chose to accept General Philip Sheridan’s offer of safe transport to Union territory in October 1864. “Shenandoah Refugees” won the top prize in the Kentucky Green River Writers annual contest in 2009.

Rebecca Suter Lindsay lives in Crestview Hills, Kentucky. She is editor of *Pegasus*, the Kentucky State Poetry Society. She is currently writing a novel about Brethren and Mennonite family experiences during the Civil War.

The Editor’s article about the refugee train is an attempt to summarize what is known about this little known aspect of Civil War history.

See three important announcements of upcoming events at end of the issue.

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SHERIDAN'S 1864 WAGON TRAIN

by Elwood E. Yoder

Near the end of September, 1864, during the burning of Valley barns and mills, Union General Philip Sheridan offered seats to six young Mennonite men in his Harrisonburg military tent. Peter S. Hartman, 17, and the others had requested papers and safe transport to northern states, believing they would be drafted by the desperate Confederacy when Sheridan's thousands of troops left the Valley.

Hartman described General Sheridan as "the most savage looking man I think I ever saw."¹ While they sat in Sheridan's presence, a guard brought in two southerners who were charged with "bushwhacking" northern soldiers, and Sheridan ordered the two prisoners shackled and severely punished.

Sheridan was a brutal general, having carried out Grant's order to burn the Valley from mountain range to mountain range, yet Sheridan exercised restraint on at least two occasions during the Valley Campaign of 1864. Just before his orders to burn Dayton were to be carried out, Sheridan yielded to a request from one of his officers who did not want to burn the houses and buildings in the town. Second, during the worst of the 13 days of Valley burning, fall, 1864, he surprisingly offered Valley residents a military escort to the north and out of the torched region.

Peter S. Hartman, along with the other Mennonite men who met General Sheridan, received passes to leave with the retreating Union forces. A message had been sent throughout the region such that if any families wanted safe passage out of the area, they should come to Harrisonburg by October 6. In some cases, the Union forces even supplied

the refugee families with wagons and horses.

The wagon train that General Sheridan led north was not primarily for transporting refugees. It was a military supply line from Union territory and it was a means of transporting confiscated supplies and food north for the thousands of Union troops. Estimates were that the wagon convoy was 16 miles long, with 1,600 wagons, 400 of which carried refugees.² Sheridan himself reported the number of 400 wagon loads of refugees, "most of these Dunkers."³ No exact accounting of the religious denomination of the refugees is available. One writer recorded that "a good many Dunkers left the county and went with the Yankees."⁴ *The Daily Dispatch*, a newspaper in Richmond, Virginia, reported that "about two hundred Dutch families went off with the Yankees this trip, bag and baggage, from Rockingham county."⁵ To count approximately 400 refugee wagons, however, does not reveal the extent of the throng that exited out of the Valley with Sheridan's troops. Many hundreds of starving and hungry people crowded the Valley Pike seeking help and a way north, with many others fleeing west and north through the mountains.⁶

It is difficult to count how many Mennonites actually traveled north on the Valley Pike with Sheridan's retreating forces. Lewis J. Heatwole wrote that a number of Mennonite families left and most of the 16 and 17 year old boys left, but he did not quantify the number.⁷ Among those known

2 John L. Heatwole, *The Burning: Sheridan's Devastation of the Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville, Va.: Rockbridge Publishing, 1998) 95, 130.

3 *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*; Series 1 - Volume 43, 308, <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu>.

4 Elsie Renalds Newcomer and Janet Renalds Ramsey, *1864-Life in the Shenandoah Valley* (Mechanicsville, Va., Hills and Mills, 2014), 230.

5 Ibid, p. 248.

6 Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley*, Vol. III (Valley Research Associates, 2005), 14.

7 Jonas S. Hartzler and Daniel Kauffman, *Mennonite Church History* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1905), 213.

1 Peter S. Hartman, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (Lancaster, Pa.: Eastern Mennonite Associated Libraries and Archives, 1964), 24.

to have traveled with General Sheridan's train were Peter S. Hartman, John S. Coffman, Samuel Brunk, Christian H. Brunk, Emanuel Suter's family, Michael and Lydia Shank family, and the David H. Landis family. Harry A. Brunk summarized his accounting of the wagon train by stating that "how many families joined in the exodus is not known."⁸ In fact, it seems most likely that the majority of Mennonite families remained in the Valley, or at least someone in the family stayed to care for buildings or animals that may have survived the Union ravages.

Samuel and Catherine Shank, a Mennonite family from Broadway, Virginia, watched their barn and house burn on that fateful day when Sheridan began his retreat, October 6, 1864. A group of Confederate scouts watched a "long white canvass-covered wagon-train" moving north on the Middle Road, burning barns and taking farm animals. From a high ridge somewhere near the Trissels Mennonite Church, they watched in horror as the Samuel Shank barn and other Broadway area barns were burned by Union forces. The scouts, called "Linville Creek boys," were constantly under threat of being captured by the thousands of foraging and destructive Union troops and cavalry. The writer in the *Rockingham Register*, N. M. Burkholder, a member of the scouts, wrote that their group included men with names like Pennybacker, Bowman, Shoup, Sites, Showalter, and Houck.⁹ The scouts had met that morning, October 6, at a wire suspension bridge in Broadway, and spent the day watching the burning and trying to avoid getting captured.

Samuel and Catherine Shank and their five children stayed on the farm the next winter, apparently living in a spring house and relying

on relatives to survive. They rebuilt both barn and house after the war ended.

Michael and Lydia Shank, on the other hand, chose to leave the Valley and accept General Sheridan's offer of safe passage to Union territory in the north. Michael Shank's farm was located near the Pike Mennonite Church, south of Harrisonburg. Thousands of troops had marched across their farm during Sheridan's two weeks of camping in the area, and then burned their barn and house, as well as taking a mare and colt, a wagon, bridles, two saddles, a new harness, 100 gallons of vinegar, 10 tons of hay, 200 bushels of corn, 100 bushels of oats, 10 beef cattle, 15 hogs, and 80 gallons of apple butter.¹⁰

Michael and Lydia Shank and their six children accepted Sheridan's military escort out of the Valley, October, 1864. Lydia got sick from the rainy and cold conditions, and she and her baby were the only ones who rode in the wagon, while the other five children and husband Michael walked to Pennsylvania. Daughter Catherine, 9, weighed only 38 pounds, though she walked the distance alongside the family's wagon and belongings.¹¹ Sometime after the war ended Michael and Lydia Shank and family returned to rebuild their farm and lives in the Shenandoah Valley.

In summary, some Mennonite families went north with the wagon train in October, 1864, while it appears that most stayed, or at least a few family members remained during the difficult winter. Second, Mennonites experienced the holocaust of burning and pillaging like other residents of the Valley. And finally, soon after the war ended in 1865, the Mennonites, like others, began the process of rebuilding their shattered lives.

8 Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia, 1727-1900, Volume I* (Staunton, Va: McClure Print Co., 1959), 171.

9 *Harrisonburg-Rockingham Register*, Vol. 78, No. 38, July 13, 1900, p. 1.

10 *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley* (Valley Research Associates, Vol. III, 2005), 539.

11 Catherine Shank (1855-1932) was a grandmother of Emma Shank Delp, who wrote *Six Little Orphans: My Story* (Harrisonburg Va., 1990), 6.



Shenandoah Refugees: October 1864

Each labored step bears us farther from our home.
 We wagon north, fleeing famine, that grave
 Aftermath of war's destructive fire.
 The wheels creak; the graveled road
 Chews at the boot, destroys its sole.
 Our hearts are sore for want of peace.

Ahead are generals; John Meigs' body, now at
 peace;
 Caissons, cannon, cattle; infantry far from home;
 Four hundred wagons of us wandering souls;
 Supplies and sutlers' stores; ambulances grave;
 All strung twelve miles along the Valley Road.
 Behind us comes the crack of rifle fire.

From east to west, the Valley is on fire:
 Sheridan's design of violence to speed peace.
 We dare not speculate beyond the road
 Which smoky column might be our home,
 Or if the barn lies ashes in its grave.
 To think of it destroys my soul.

Faced with decision, we would not sell our soul.
 Conscripted, we would not fire
 Our guns, or else aimed high. In grave
 Times of war, someone must stand for peace.
 While others fly to fight for country and for home,
 Nonviolence is the harder road.

Do not turn, Elizabeth, my love; stay the road.
 Or else the sight will sear your soul
 To salt. Block tender thoughts of home,
 Of roses by the door, the bush afire,



Of church yard walled, that place of peace,
Where two tiny daughters lie within the grave.

We chose to heed the general's grave
Warning of charred remains where soldiers rode
With flaming torch to create peace,
Or so he claimed. To strengthen soul
At night, close gathered round the fire,
We do not hang our harps, but sing of home.

On this side of the grave, thus is our road:
A fire burns deep within our soul.
We long for peace; we search for our true home.

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**“Sheridan’s Wagon Trains in the Valley.
Early morning mist and smoke.” (above)**

Alfred R. Waud, artist, drew Sheridan’s wagon train, in October, 1864, on brown paper with pencil and Chinese white. The drawing was published in *Harper’s Weekly*, November 12, 1864, p. 724. J. P. Morgan donated the drawing to the Library of Congress in 1919. An inscription in the upper right says “Blue Ridge.”

Library of Congress Call Number: DRWG/US - Waud, no. 730.

No known restrictions on publication

<http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.22455/>

Emanuel Suter Family: Refugees Sent North

by Rebecca Suter Lindsay

On or about October 2, 1864, U.S. Army troops rode onto the farm of Emanuel Suter located a few miles northwest of Harrisonburg, Virginia. Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah was camped all around the city, and the foraging soldiers took from the farm 20 bushels of wheat worth about \$40.00 for which they gave Emanuel a voucher. Over the next several days, other Union soldiers visited the farm and removed five cattle, ten sheep, 1,800 pounds of pork, two colts, four sets of housing, and fifteen bushels of oats. These soldiers left no vouchers.¹

On October 3, Sheridan offered any person who wished to escape the destruction in the Shenandoah Valley a wagon, horses and safe passage into Union territory.² Emanuel Suter, a Mennonite farmer and potter, had made no secret of his Unionist and pacifist views. Over the four preceding years, he had been intimidated into voting for secession, had his horses and wagon impressed into service by the Confederate army, had struggled to avoid conscription and had even been imprisoned briefly for harboring his brother, Jacob, who had deserted the Confederate army.³

Recent action taken by the Confederate Congress abolishing the Exemption Act of 1862, which had allowed Mennonite and Dunker men who opposed the war to avoid military service,⁴ must have also weighed in his decision. Before October 1864, Emanuel had made no attempt to leave the South.⁵ Now, at

age thirty-one, he welcomed the opportunity to escape north.

Packing for the journey must have been done in a scramble. The Suters stored furniture with the Hugh Swope family,⁶ gathered needed supplies, and left Harrisonburg with Sheridan's army on October 5, one of an estimated 400 wagons carrying Valley refugees.⁷

On the trip, Emanuel carried a small, red daybook in which he recorded the events of the journey. He lists the members of the family who traveled with him: His wife, Elizabeth; their three small children, Reuben Daniel, Susan Virginia and John Robert; his father, Daniel; sister, Margaret; and brother, Christian. In a sad note, he mentions that two little girls, Mary Margaret and Sarah Jane had died prior to 1864.⁸

Progress was slow at first. The Valley Pike was a macadamized road with a surface of crushed stone. Emanuel writes that his horses were "barefooted and very tender."⁹ Fortunately, the army rested on October 6 near Mount Jackson, and he was able to have the horses shod. Later, he notes that it was a good thing since thereafter "we were pushed on hurretly [*sic*] in a fast walk but most of the time in a trot."¹⁰

At night the family camped in open fields in weather that turned wet and cold. Emanuel and Daniel were forced to stand guard during the night to prevent the horses from being stolen.¹¹ As Sheridan's army withdrew down the Valley, his troops continued to burn southern properties. The haze and stench of smoke covered the land from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Alleghenies. Bushwhackers

1 Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley*, Vol. III (Valley Research Associates, 2005), 738-739.

2 John L. Heatwole, *The Burning: Sheridan's Devastation of the Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville, Va.: Rockbridge Publishing, 1998), 62.

3 Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War*, 742-743, 754.

4 Heatwole, *The Burning*, 62.

5 Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War*, 761.

6 Mary Eugenia Suter, *Memories of Yesteryear: A History of the Suter Family* (Waynesboro, Va.: Charles F. McClung Printer, 1959), 47.

7 Heatwole, *The Burning*, 130.

8 Emanuel Suter, *Diary: October, 1864 - January, 1865* (Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives, Harrisonburg, Virginia), 1-2.

9 Suter *Diary*, 1.

10 Suter *Diary*, 2.

11 Suter *Diary*, 2-3.

nipped and bit at the army's rear, attacking and capturing supplies where they could.¹²

Despite the dangers and hardships, Emanuel was comforted to find many friends and neighbors from Rockingham County traveling with them.¹³ When they camped at night, the civilians would come together and sing. Not only did singing encourage them, it also brought solace to the homesick and heart sore soldiers who crowded around to listen.¹⁴

On October 10, the wagon train reached Martinsburg, West Virginia. Here, all Confederate citizens who wished to enter Union territory were required to take an oath of allegiance to the United States. Margaret Suter evidently valued the slip of paper certifying that she had taken the oath as it was found after her death among her papers. At the bottom of the slip was noted her status: "refugee sent north."¹⁵

On October 12, the Suters left Sheridan's army and moved on into Maryland where the women and children took the train to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Emanuel, Daniel and Christian and the Albert Fishback family brought the horses, wagons and carriages cross-country and joined them there.¹⁶ Their journey had been sudden, traumatic, and grueling, and ahead of them were months of surviving in a strange land; but also in the future were experiences that would mark and benefit their lives after the war.

SVMH Annual Meeting

The 2014 Annual Business Meeting of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians will take place November 8, 9:30 AM, at Village Hall, on the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Campus, 1501 Virginia Ave., Harrisonburg, Virginia. The entrance to Village Hall is at the intersection of Heritage Drive and Shank Drive on the VMRC campus. The meeting will include the regular annual business meeting items.

A feature of the Annual Meeting will include a lecture by Dale MacAllister, Resident Historian at the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society, Dayton, Virginia. MacAllister will speak about the Shenandoah Valley burning in 1864 and the refugee train that went north.

All are welcome at the Annual Historian's meeting, to hear a lecture by a noted local historian, and to learn of updates from the officers of the organization.

History Day 2014

On October 31, 2014, 8:00 AM- 3:00 PM, students and teachers at Eastern Mennonite School will engage in an experiential history day in which they learn about 19th century life and culture. On the sesquicentennial of the Valley's Burning, students will taste food, play games, sing from the *Harmonia Sacra*, and engage in a variety of activities to teach about the Civil War events of 1864.

The Editor will speak about the burning from 8:10-8:35 AM in the EMHS school auditorium. All are welcome to attend.

Visitors are invited to come and observe the many history activities, but need to register at the main office when you arrive.

12 Heatwole, *The Burning*, 130-131.

13 Suter *Diary*, 2, 4.

14 Heatwole, *The Burning*, 131.

15 Mary Eugenia Suter, *Memories of Yesteryear*, 43.

16 Suter *Diary*, 4-5.



Regina Wenger will deliver the 13th Annual Kennel Charles Church History Lecture at Eastern Mennonite High School, January 19, 2015, 7:00 PM, in the school Auditorium. Regina Wenger will speak about her research on Amos D. Wenger, her great-grandfather, in a lecture entitled "Illumination in the West: A. D. Wenger's Theology of Revival, Dispensationalism, and Mission." The public is welcome to attend this free lecture.

The *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* is published quarterly by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, established in 1993.

Officers of the Historians:

Chair, Jim Hershberger

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Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

Forthcoming *Historian* Topics in 2015:

- Book review of *Conscience in the courtroom : history of the Mountain View Mennonite school system, Dayton, Virginia, 1968-2006*, by Daniel E. Burkholder
- Three stories from a 1944 Mennonite Church crisis

If you have an idea for an article or picture for the *Historian*, contact the Editor at elyoder@gmail.com.

Past issues of the *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* can be found in PDF format at http://mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net/Shenandoah_Historian.html

The Pike Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Virginia, pictured on the cover, in a photo by Elwood E. Yoder, represents a church that weathered the 1864 burning.

Cost of an individual membership is \$6.00 per year, or \$10 per couple. Send membership fees or inquiries to James Rush, e-mail jamesrush@comcast.net, phone 540-434-0792, or U.S. mail 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 22802

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